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CARYN D. RISWOLD

# A New Image for an Ancient Call: Lutheran Higher Education Amidst Pandemics Today

When the Wartburg College community gathered in October 2019 to dedicate the *Lebenskreuz* sculpture featured on the cover of this issue of *Intersections*, we could not have known how the academic year would end. We could not have understood how painfully necessary its reminder of Jesus's call to tend to our neighbors' needs would become in just one semester's time.

The design has particular connection to the history of Wartburg College and its institutional vocation. It comes from the Diakoneo in Neuendettelsau, Germany, where Wilhelm Löhe founded a social ministry enterprise in 1854,

as a response to the Industrial Revolution's legacy of deteriorating social conditions for disadvantaged populations. This move came just two short years after Löhe had directed Georg M. Grossmann to establish a pastoral ministry training school for German immigrants in the United States—a school that would become Wartburg College. (Wartburg College)

The sculpture is a 12-foot tall stainless steel and stained glass version of the smaller wooden crosses crafted in the Diakoneo's workshops, "where people with disabilities are

provided vocational training, job coaches, and work opportunities crafting handmade items, including the *Lebenskreuz*" (Wartburg College). One of these sits on the altar of the Wartburg College Chapel. The design notably features panels depicting the acts of mercy narrated in Matthew 25:35-40:



"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer then, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

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We had no way to know in 2019 that this ancient summons to serve the neighbor would take on renewed urgency for our campus communities in the coming year, communities that are, in the word of *Rooted and Open*, “called and empowered to serve the neighbor so that all may flourish” (NECU). In what follows, I pair the works of mercy with the commitments articulated in *Rooted and Open* so that each might guide us through tumultuous times.

### **Called and Empowered: “I was sick and you took care of me.”**

The Covid-19 pandemic pushed every community across the globe to focus on care for its sick and dying neighbors. College communities like ours were forced to identify potential sites for quarantining infected students, develop processes to protect vulnerable members of the community, and ultimately create overnight plans to evacuate campuses.

As a new academic year commenced, new plans yet again had to be developed by Campus Health Recovery teams taking into account the needs for rapid testing, contact tracing, quarantines, and return-to-learn plans that include mask mandates and reconfigured classroom spaces. With a text like Matthew 25 before us, and a piece of art visually compelling us, care for the sick and attention to the dying has become a central call of a Lutheran college and its graduates in 2020.

### **To Serve the Neighbor: “I was hungry and you gave me food”; “I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink.”**

The economic shutdown that was a result of the spread of Covid-19 revealed another pandemic, as exhibited in lines at food banks, weekly unemployment claims that shattered record highs in United States economic history, and shuttered businesses and campuses that will never return to our communities. The hungry and thirsty in our communities had fewer places to turn for support; even congressional bailout packages prioritized corporate protections over rent-relief.

Feeding the hungry and giving sustenance to the thirsty means attending to the embodied needs of our neighbor. Students who had to return home often found themselves with unemployed parents and lost jobs for themselves.

Even on our campuses, for the students who were unable to leave because they didn’t have a safe home to return to or a country that would allow them to return, food insecurity reached new levels, with drastically reduced dining options and increased reliance on food pantry services. Colleges were called to rethink what it means to feed the hungry and sustain the thirsty in our own residence halls as well as in our communities.

### **So That All May Flourish: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”**

The murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, and the public demands for accountability, justice, and transformation of our white supremacist society called every community to examine who is and is not welcomed, who is and is not supported and protected. For predominantly white colleges and universities, which includes many ELCA schools, this included a reckoning with the experiences of students and alumni of color. These students should be emboldened to tell their stories, make their pain public, and demand that the institution adhere to the very values it espouses, yet often fails to enact.

Welcoming the stranger is about listening and seeing across lines of difference, including racial difference. Welcoming requires naming and letting go of fear, finding a space where one can be vulnerable and safe at the same time. To speak of welcoming is also to presume a power dynamic embedded in the roles of host and visitor, one that also demands examination and radical reframing. Matthew 25 is a text that pushes us to do that work of reframing and humbling.

As the public work of racial reckoning continued into the summer, the Department of Homeland Security proposed to change a policy that would have forced deportation of any international student enrolled at a college or university whose education had to move to remote-delivery or online instruction due to the pandemic. This literal rejection of the visitor, the stranger, prompted a wave of resistance, including statements from individual college presidents like this one:

We will move heaven and earth to ensure that you can continue taking courses in a way that satisfies the U.S. government. Not only are you welcome on

this campus, you are Wartburg Knights, and, as such, you are as entitled to be in this community, on this campus, as I am. (Colson)

Though this proposed change to student visa regulations was rescinded in response to lawsuits and amicus briefs from leading higher education organizations and institutions, it happened amidst the myriad pandemics to which we are called to respond. Like the other pandemics, it is a product of the structures that continue to disenfranchise members of our campus communities.

## Deadly Structures and the Cross of Life

In her analysis of Matthew 25, womanist theologian Mitzi J. Smith notes that

it places more emphasis on *acts* of social justice (feeding the hungry, visiting the sick and imprisoned) than on actually *changing* those systems that promote the perpetual existence of poverty, hunger, prison nations and enslavement, and sickness, as opposed to equity, health, wholeness, protections, and freedom for all. (Smith 92)

She argues that “systemic change is necessary to destroy poverty, inequities, and injustice” because “I don’t believe we love a God who encourages the normalization of violence” (92). So yes, these acts of mercy are necessary “to keep people alive and healthy in the meantime,” but let us not lose sight of a larger call—to eradicate the systems and structures that produced such pandemics in the first place.

*Lebenskreuz* means “cross of life,” a term which itself captures a paradox embedded in Martin Luther’s call for Christians to be theologians of the cross, wherein an instrument of torture and death becomes a source of life and divine accompaniment. “God can be found only in suffering and the cross,” writes Luther. For this reason, a person “deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross” (“Heidelberg” 52). God is found in the unexpected places, at the margins of society,

in suffering and pain, confounding the best of human wisdom and calling us to serve our neighbors in precisely those places and times.

In Luther’s own 1527 letter, “Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague,” he repeatedly refers to Matthew 25 and the acts of mercy that Jesus commands. At one point, he writes, “if it were Christ or his mother who were laid low by illness, everybody would be so solicitous and would gladly become a servant or helper....And yet they don’t hear what Christ himself says, ‘As you did to one of the least, you did it to me’ [Matt. 25:40]” (130).

May the presence of this sculpture on our campus, and on this cover, be a public reminder of the calling of Lutheran colleges and universities to welcome the stranger, feed the hungry and thirsty, care for the sick and dying, and tend to the imprisoned. The pandemics we navigate today are not new, and dismantling the structures that produced them requires educated citizens who can advocate for systemic change and do the hard and messy work to transform the social and political conditions that produced them.

So that all may truly flourish.

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